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ABSTRACT

Only a longitudinal study, in which retrospective reports can be verified against data collected earlier, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain types of individuals are more likely to be accurate reporters. A representative group of adults who became parents 50 years ago are now part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging. Husbands and wives (N=56) were first interviewed at mean age 29 and again at 47 and 69. Factual questions asked at each interview included education, occupation, and age at marriage of self and spouse. Attitudinal variables included reports of marital relationship, bond and relationship with child, and financial strain. Results showed systematic changes in reports over time and indicated that relevant circumstances exerted a strong influence on the recall of past events. For both men and women, retrospective reports of relationship with the child were more strongly associated with circumstances at the time of the report than with the past relationship. Overall accuracy did not change as subjects grew older and as the time span of the recollections increased. The findings suggest that relevant circumstances exert a strong influence on the recall of past events. (Author/NRB)

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RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS OF AGING SPOUSES OF PAST EVENTS IN THEIR LIVES TOGETHER

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development, Toronto, Canada, August 1981.

RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS OF AGING SPOUSES OF PAST EVENTS IN THEIR LIVES TOGETHER

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A rare opportunity to examine the recollections of aging husbands and wives about important personal events they shared in common over 40 years is reported in this paper.

Theories of personality development have relied heavily on retrospective reports for evidence of the influence of earlier events on later personality characteristics. From the time of Freud, retrospective reports have provided much of the substance in studies concerned with the role of early experience and parental functioning in personality development. Similarly, theorists of aging have necessarily placed considerable faith in data collected from old people through recollections and reminiscence. Yet we know very little about how much can be observed by the recollector/informant, or how much can be retained, or how it will be reported.

Only a longitudinal study, in which the retrospective reports can be verified against data collected at earlier times, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain sorts of persons are more likely to be accurate reporters.

Paper presented at the meetings of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Toronto, August, 1981.

There have been few studies of retrospective reports from persons of any age (for a review, see Field, 1979). Most of these have examined mothers' reports of events in the early lives of their children (Douglas & Blomfield, 1956; Pyles, Stolz, & Macfarlane, 1935; Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970) or the reports of young adults who were subjects of longitudinal studies (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979; Livson & McNeill, 1962; Weishaus, 1980). The only studies that have been able to investigate the recall of older persons have examined memory for public events (Squire, 1974), public faces (Warrington & Sanders, 1971), objects in common use (Poon & Fozard, 1978), or events of limited personal significance (Baddeley, Lewis, & Nimmo-Smith, 1979; Gekoski & Kerrigan, 1980). In spite of the obvious importance of the question, I have found no other studies that have investigated the accuracy of reports by elderly people of personal events occurring in their own lives.

All the earlier studies have found considerable inaccuracy in memory over time. "Factual" information is recollected with more consistency than "attitudinal" information. Many studies found a directional shift as well, for information was recalled as "better" than it in fact had been: the baby walked and talked earlier, the mother nursed him longer, the child was more outgoing in nursery school, the family had been less often visited by police than could be credited statistically, the men were taller, or the financial situation had not been as difficult as it had appeared earlier.

In view of the burgeoning of interest in aging and the fact that most research will of necessity be cross-sectional,

it is crucial to determine the interpretability of retrospective reports from cross-sectional samples. A comparison of the recall of husbands and wives of earlier events is reported here.

Method

Subjects

The subjects are a representative sample of a group of young adults who became parents of babies in Berkeley, California, 50 years ago (Macfarlane, 1938). These babies became the subjects of the famous Guidance Study at the Institute of Human Development, and their contribution to our understanding of child development is incalculable, but immense (Jones, Bayley, Macfarlane, & Honzik, 1971). The parents, originally studied only for their influence on their children, have recently come to be seen as subjects of great interest in their own right (Field, 1981a; Kuypers, 1974; Maas & Kuypers, 1977; Mussen, Eichorn, Honzik, Bieber, & Meredith, 1980), and are now recognized as part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging.

These adults were interviewed intensively when their children became part of the Guidance Study, and they themselves were young adults (YA), in 1928-1929; again when they were middle aged (MA) and their children were 17 years old, in 1945-1947; and when their children were 40, and they were young-old (YO), in 1968-1969.

My report concerns 56 people who had intact marriages through the 40 years of the Guidance Study and who had survived to be interviewed in young-old age. At the time of the last follow-up, the men were on average age 71 and the women 68,

with a range of 59 to 80.

Although they are a favored group in some ways, they still are broadly representative of surviving persons of their age: every educational level is represented, from eight years of education to graduate degrees; as is every occupational level, from unskilled laborer to high professionals. Their average educational level was some college for the men and high school graduate for the women. The mean occupational level of the men was approximately Hollingshead's category III: administrative, small businessman, etc. All of the group still live in California, and 80% are within a one-hour drive of the city where their children were born more than 50 years ago -- a stable population. Their average IQ at age 69 was 115, normally distributed around this high mean.

Analysis

Retrospective questions dealing with events shared in common were examined. These events were demographic: occupation, education, and financial status; marital adjustment; and relationship with the child.

A measure of association, a correlation coefficient, was used (1) to compare the recollections of each couple about the earlier events, and (2) to examine reports over time for men and women separately. Consistency of report, then, was examined over all time comparisons: retrospective reports made in MA about events occuring in YA, a 17-year period; those made in YO about events of MA, a span of 23 years; and also reports in YO of events of YA, recall over 40 years.

As is common with longitudinal studies, some of the

subjects did not furnish some of the information some of the time, and not all subjects have complete scores. In spite of the perennial problem of missing data, however, interesting results were found.

Results

The Child

The most interesting results concern the recollections of the child who is the subject of the Guidance Study. Of course, the relationship with the child was not experienced entirely in common, for each of the parents had quite separate experiences with the child. Nevertheless, correlations between fathers' and mothers' bond and relationship with their child were for the most part high: .37 and .50 in YA, .61 and .58 in MA, and .11 and .66 in YO.

The top pair of graphs in Figure 1 show the true changes in the contemporary ratings of bond and relationship between parent and child when the child was an infant, a teenager, and 40 years old. The lower sets examine the reports of relationship and bond made at two times. The direction of change of report parallels that of the true change of relationship, suggesting that the present relationship influences the perceptions of the past. Although only the women's reports of the adolescent relationship and bond reached significance, the trends are persistent.

These changing reports were analyzed with canonical correlations, which allow one to examine the interdependency of the sets of variables. Figures 2 and 3 examine the reports made in MA about the relationship with the young child in YA and the association of this report with the true relationships in YA

and MA. Three measures contribute to the general concept of relationship with child in YA: ratings of bond, relationship, and and whether the child was favored or resented. Three similar ratings made in MA contribute to the concept of relationship with child in MA. The third group constitutes the reports: ratings of bond and relationship based directly on responses in the interview and a third, more global, rating of relationship at the earlier time based on the coder's impressions after reading the whole interview.

The canonical correlation between the true relationship with the child in YA and the retrospective report of this relationship is high, but not significant, $R_c = .78$. However, the canonical correlation between the true relationship in MA and reports made in MA about the earlier time is extremely high: $R_c = .99$, $p < .001$ for the women and .98, $p < .006$ for the men. Present circumstances strongly influence recall of the past.

The recollections of YO about relations with the child as an adolescent tell a similar story, as shown in Figures 4 and 5. Although the canonical correlations between true relationship in MA and the later report of this relationship are high, $R_c = .84$ for women and .73 for men, they are not statistically reliable. Once again, we find that the present relationship significantly influences the recall of the past: the canonical between YO relations and recall in YO is $R_c = .88$, $p < .003$, for women and $R_c = .78$, $p < .001$, for men.

Figure 6 examines yet another aspect: the "state" of the recollector in young-old age. Three variables that were thought to affect these reports were frequency of visits with family, frequency of visits with the GS child in particular,

and rating of involvement with family. As can be seen, these "state" variables were highly, but not reliably, correlated with reports of the past for women, $R_c = .80$. The similar correlation for the men, however, is significant, $R_c = .78$, $p < .02$. [1]

Not surprisingly, it was found that women were in greater agreement with their earlier reports about the child than were the men. Table 1 shows that women were higher in their over-time correlations on six retrospective variables.

Demographic Questions

Retrospective reports of education and occupation of both wives and husbands as well as ratings of men's involvement in work and financial status of the couple were investigated. Table 2 compares the reports of husbands and wives; Table 3 compares the reports over time both of men and of women.

Very high agreement is found in reports of education of both spouses at all time comparisons, with rs of .88 to .98. Higher agreement is found for reports of men's occupations, rs of .93 to .95, than of women's, rs of .43 to .76. Even when the men's and women's consistency with their own earlier reports is examined (Table 3), it can be seen that both men and women are more consistent in their reports of the occupations of the men, rs of .73 to .92, than those of the women, rs of .22 to .73. This may be an example of the effect of salience of a topic on accuracy of recall.

Little agreement is found in reports about financial status, $r = .13$; even less agreement is found in the reports of the involvement of the husband in his earlier career, $r = -.21$.

There is a pervasive difference between men and women in the optimism of their reports. Men's reports are "better" in

recall in six of the seven retrospective reports on demographic variables, in five of the six contemporary reports, and in three of the four reports of education. Women's reports were "better" only once.

Marriage

Another event that these men and women shared was their marriages. However, questions about earlier marital adjustment were not systematically asked, so it is not possible to explore this interesting area. One can, however, note that there was stronger agreement between spouses in ratings of marital variables in MA than in YO, as shown in Table 4. The correlation between husbands and wives in marital adjustment in old age, as independently rated based on extensive interview information, is only .21.

Once again, a pervasive tendency was noted for the men to be more optimistic than the women, both in MA and in YO. Three out of five MA reports and all three YO reports found the men making reports about aspects of the contemporary marriages that were, on average, "better" than the women's.

Recollections of Enjoyment in the Past

An open-ended question asked in the MA and YO interviews has provided much of interest (Field, 1981b). In connection with a general question about how life had been earlier, the participants were asked about what they had most enjoyed in their 20s and also in their 40s. Spontaneous responses received one of ten codings, such as travel, career, friends, or leisure activities. Here we will examine only those responses where

spouse or child were mentioned.

Table 5 gives the percents of all responses that concerned spouse or child. Up to three responses were coded for each participant. Whether the recollector was in MA or YO, the child was most likely to be recalled. On average, 35% of all reports of things enjoyed cited the child, whereas only 21% cited the spouse as having been enjoyed. The child was also more likely to be named as having been least enjoyed, on average 18% of all reports. The spouse was named in only 8% of all reports of things not enjoyed.

In 12 cases both members of a couple mentioned that they had enjoyed their child; four couples reported this on both occasions. One couple was in agreement that they had not enjoyed their child as a teenager. In only four cases did both husband and wife spontaneously mention that they had enjoyed their spouses.

Discussion

It is clear that relevant circumstances exert a strong influence on the recall of past events. This conclusion is not unexpected, yet never before has it been possible to examine with a group of elderly persons Adler's (1931) assertion that memories reflect a style of life, and that memories will alter if the style of life alters.

An earlier study in this series (Field, 1981) found important changes over time in recollections of the happiness of childhood, for

report. These changes were associated with changes in recall of other aspects of childhood, such as relationship with own mother

and father, quality of intellectual life in the childhood home, or health in childhood, but were not related to adult circumstances such as education, health, relationship with own child, or life satisfaction.

A recent study of the affect of middle aged women toward their aging mothers examined the relationship between these same Guidance Study mothers and their 40 year old daughters. Weishaus (1980) found that the daughters' recall of the earlier relationship with the mothers was much more strongly correlated with the present mother-daughter relationship that it was with the past relationship. This corroborates the broader findings of recollection of relationship reported here. Most importantly, it shows that similar mechanisms of recall are operating in the two generations.

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Footnotes

1. It is important to note that because the Ns were small in each of the canonical correlations, the effects reported here may be unstable. The effects are so great, however, that I am encouraged to report them, including this caution.

2. The numbers shown in Figures 2 to 6 were generated as follows. The canonical correlations, the R_cs, were obtained through the SPSS CANCORR program. The R_c represents the maximum possible value resulting from the correlation of a linear combination of the X set (in this case the Relationship) variables with the Y set (Report) variables. The coefficients of these linear combinations are often used to report the weights of each individual variable's contribution to the canonical variate score. For example, in the comparison shown in Figure 3, the canonical variate set 1 (Relationship) includes bond 1.51, relationship -1.60, and resent/favor -.21. These weights do not, however, indicate the true contribution of each of these variables because their intercorrelated nature leads to suppression of the second member (in this case relationship) by the first. I have here followed the suggestion of Levine (1977) and others and provided the correlations of the original variables with each canonical variate to show which of the original variables that make it up are highly correlated with the canonical variate. The correlations obtained from the canonical structure matrix, bond .878, relationship .988, and resent/favor .036, show that bond and relationship are both highly and independently correlated with the canonical variate score, but the rating of whether the child was resented or favored makes no contribution.

For a concise and readable explanation of canonical analysis, the reader is referred to Levine, M. S. Canonical Analysis and Factor Comparison. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977.

Table 1

Men's and Women's Retrospective Reports about their Child, Correlations of the Later and Earlier Reports

Variable	Men	Women
Bond with Child in Young Adulthood (reports in YA and MA)	--	-.10
Relationship with Child in Young Adulthood (reports in YA and MA)	--	-.03
Bond with Child in Middle Age (reports in MA and YO)	.28	.69**
Relationship with Child in Middle Age (reports in MA and YO)	-.07	.65**
Did you Raise your Child as You were Raised? (reports in MA and YO)	-.11	-.18
Did you want College for Your Child? (reports in MA and YO)	.44*	.57**

Note: * = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$
-- = not enough cases for correlation

TABLE 2

AGREEMENT OVER TIME BETWEEN SPOUSES ON DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

VARIABLE	REPORTED AT	
	MA	YO
EDUCATION OF WOMEN	.96**	.95**
EDUCATION OF MEN	.98**	.93**
MEN'S OCCUPATION IN YA	--	.93**
WOMEN'S OCCUPATION IN YA	--	.43*
MEN'S OCCUPATION IN MA	--	.94**
WOMEN'S OCCUPATION IN MA	.34	.76**
MEN'S OCCUPATION IN YO		.95**
WOMEN'S OCCUPATION IN YO		.72**
FINANCIAL STATUS IN YA	--	.13
FINANCIAL STATUS IN YO		.42*
MEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN WORK IN MA	.55	-.21
MEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN WORK IN YO		.24

NOTE: * = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$
-- = NOT ENOUGH CASES FOR CORRELATION

TABLE 3

COMPARING MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CONSISTENCY OF THEIR REPORTS OVER TIME

VARIABLE	MEN			WOMEN		
	YA-MA	MA-YO	YA-YO	YA-MA	MA-YO	YA-YO
EDUCATION OF MEN	.88**	.89**	.93**	.88**	.88**	.91**
EDUCATION OF WOMEN	.93**	.93**	.90**	.94**	.97**	.92**
MEN'S OCCUPATION IN YA		.92**	.80**		.73**	.80**
WOMEN'S OCCUPATION IN YA		--	--		.22	--
MEN'S OCCUPATION IN MA		.83**			.73**	
WOMEN'S OCCUPATION IN MA		.58*			.73**	
FINANCIAL STATUS IN YA		.34	--		.13	.68**
(MEAN CORRELATIONS FOR EDUCATION)		(.91**)			(.93**)	
(MEAN CORRELATIONS FOR OCCUPATION)		(.81**)			(.68**)	

NOTE: * = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$
-- = NOT ENOUGH CASES FOR CORRELATION

TABLE 4

REPORTS BY SPOUSES OF THEIR MARITAL ADJUSTMENT IN MIDDLE AGE AND YOUNG-OLD AGE

	R =
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT IN MIDDLE AGE	.67*
MARITAL HARMONY IN MIDDLE AGE	.55*
EMOTIONAL TONE OF FAMILY IN MIDDLE AGE	.65*
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT IN YOUNG-OLD AGE	.21
MARITAL HARMONY IN YOUNG-OLD AGE	.30
CHANGE IN MARITAL ADJUSTMENT OVER TIME	.24
AGREEMENT OVER FINANCIAL PLANNING	.13

NOTE: * = $p < .05$
** = $p < .01$

TABLE 5

REPORTS MADE IN MIDDLE AGE AND YOUNG-OLD AGE OF ENJOYMENT OF SPOUSE AND CHILD

TIME OF REPORT	THINGS ENJOYED		THINGS NOT ENJOYED	
	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN
	CHILD			
MA	50%	32%	22%	22%
YO	33%	25%	3%	27%
	SPOUSE			
MA	15%	19%	0%	22%
YO	21%	28%	3%	6%

NOTE: NUMBERS ARE PERCENTS OF ALL RESPONSES GIVEN IN ALL TEN CATEGORIES

Figure Captions

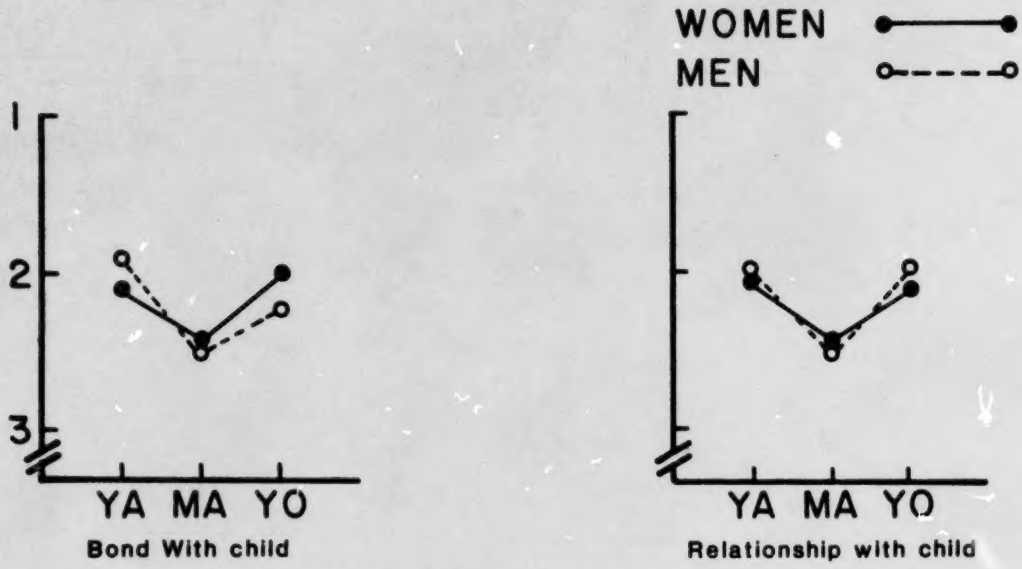
Figure 1. Contemporary and Recalled Bond and Relationship with Chile at Three Life Periods

Figure 2. Canonical Correlations. Association of the Actual Relationship with Child in Young Adulthood with Reports of that Early Relationship made in Middle Age and Association of the Report of Early Relationship made in Middle Age with the Actual Relationship with Child in Middle Age.

Note: The canonical correlations for the women are above the line and that of the men is below the line.

Figure 3. Canonical Correlations. Association of the Actual Relationship with Child in Middle Age with Reports of that Relationship made in Young-old Age and Association of the Report of Middle-age Relationship made in Young-old Age with the Actual Relationship with Child in Young-old Age and also Association of the Report made in Young-old Age with the "State" or Circumstances of the Reporter in Young-old Age.

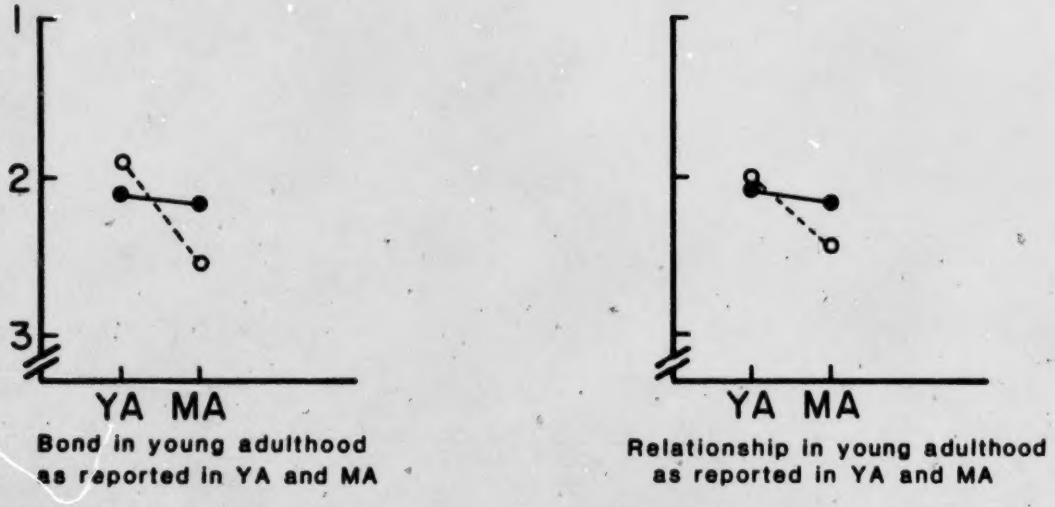
Note: The canonical correlations for the women are above the lines and for the men are below the lines.



Bond With child

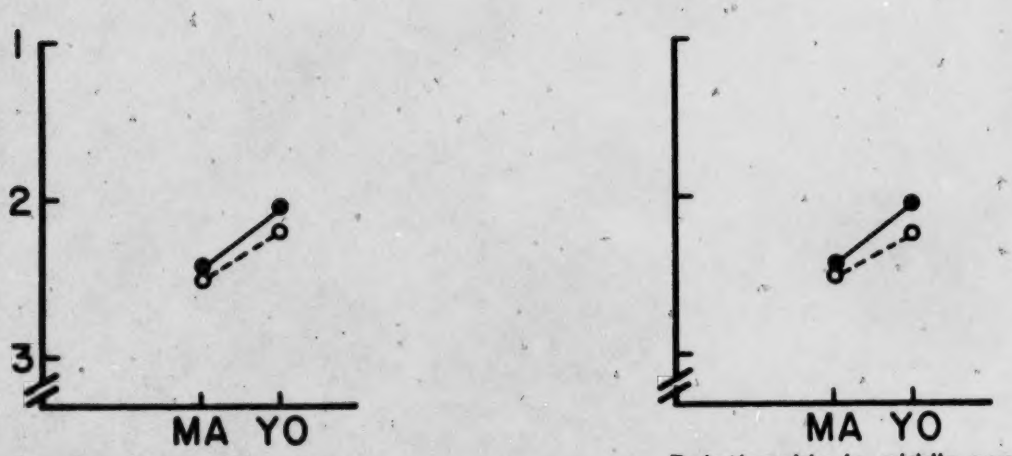
Relationship with child

Contemporary Ratings



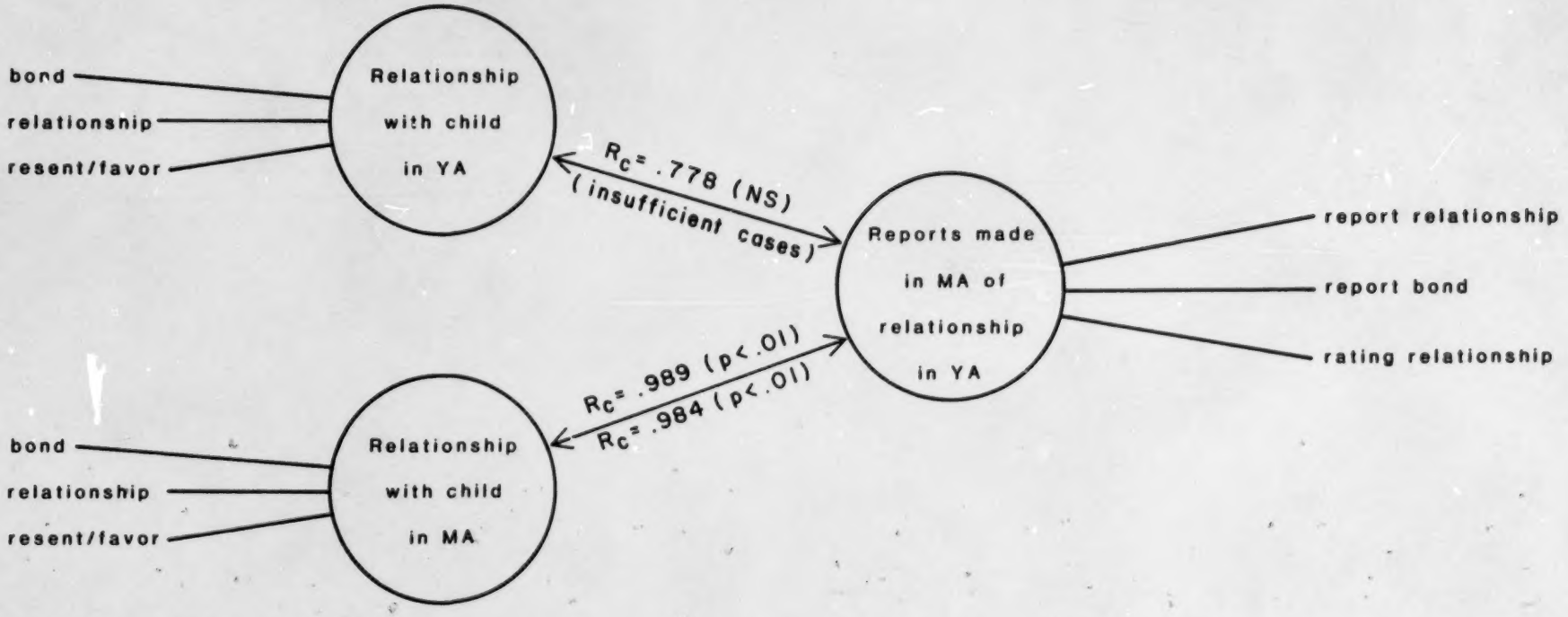
Bond in young adulthood as reported in YA and MA

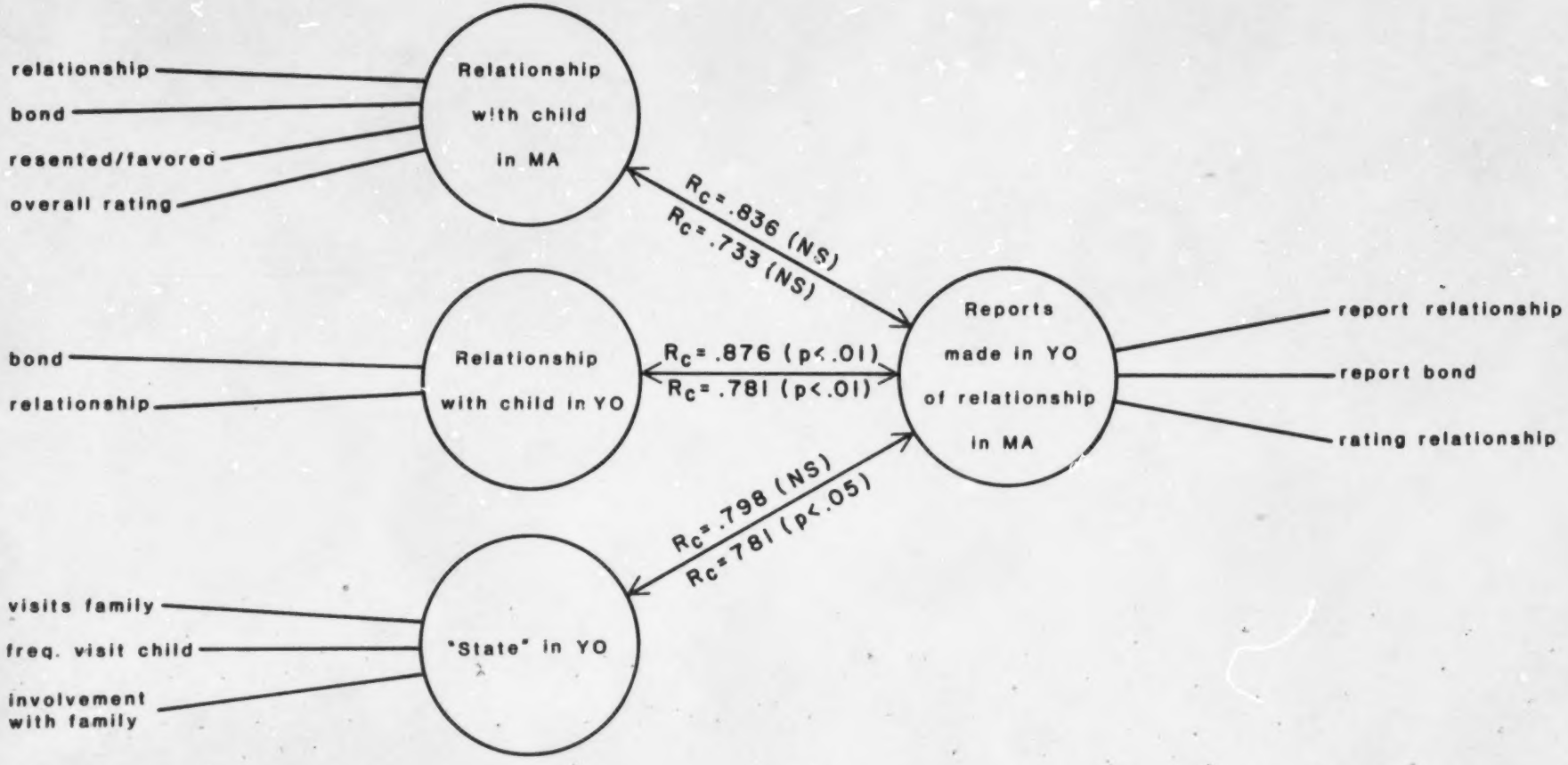
Relationship in young adulthood as reported in YA and MA



Bond in middle age as reported in MA and YO

Relationship in middle age as reported in MA and YO


bond
relationship
resent/favor
Relationship with child in YA
R_c = .778 (NS)
(insufficient cases)
Reports made in MA of relationship in YA
report relationship
report bond
rating relationship
R_c = .989 (p<.01)
R_c = .984 (p<.01)
bond
relationship
resent/favor
Relationship with child in MA


relationship
bond
resented/favored
overall rating
Relationship with child in MA
Rc = .836 (NS)
Rc = .733 (NS)
bond
relationship
Relationship with child in YO
Rc = .876 (p<.01)
Rc = .781 (p<.01)
Reports made in YO of relationship in MA
report relationship
report bond
rating relationship
Rc = .798 (NS)
Rc = 781 (p<.05)
visits family
freq. visit child
involvement with family
"State" in YO